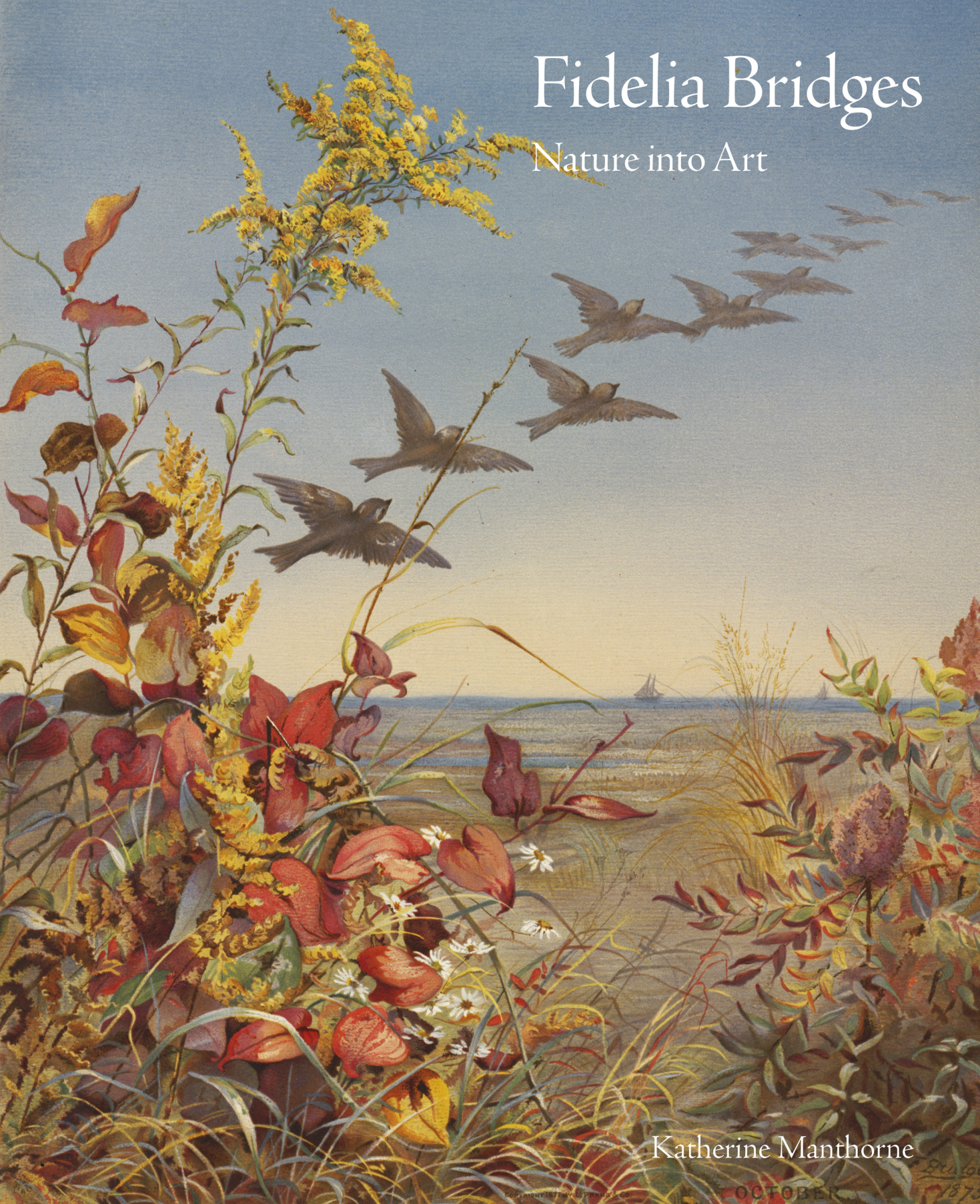


Fidelia Bridges

Nature into Art



Katherine Manthorne

OCTOBER

Fidelia Bridges

Northern Lights

Series Editor: Walter Melion, Asa Griggs Candler Professor of Art History,
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The 'Northern Lights' book series profiles Northern art in its infinite variety, including paintings, sculptures, objects and architecture. Often the phrase 'Northern art' conjures iconic works of the Northern Renaissance and the 'Dutch Golden Age'. While welcoming contributions about such works, this series also looks beyond 'the usual suspects'. The extended time period – from the Middle Ages to the 19th century – invites authors to explore themes in Northern art without the constraint of conventional chronological boundaries. The expansive geographical coverage offers the potential to highlight the names and works of artists and movements that haven't been privileged in art-historical publishing up until now.

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Fidelia Bridges

Nature into Art

Katherine Manthorne

LUND	
HUMPHRIES	

For James

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Acknowledgments

Fidelia Bridges was blessed with a circle of close friends and relatives who took loving care of her artwork, library and correspondence. They in turn passed these on to their descendants who have continued to safeguard her legacy, preserving materials and distributing them to appropriate museums and archives. I have been the beneficiary of their wisdom in preserving these treasures and their generosity in sharing them. As is often the case, my association with them depended on a bit of serendipity. An inquiry to Elizabeth Farish, Curator at Strawberry Banke Museum, led to an introduction to Wickie Rowland, an indirect descendant of Bridges who became a staunch and generous supporter of this project. Her father Philip Chadwick Foster Smith, who had been a distinguished curator at what is now the Peabody Essex Museum, possessed the well-honed research skills and passion for family history necessary to compile the database on Bridges' life and art that Wickie enthusiastically shared with me. Her cousin Judy Hayes bequeathed artworks by Bridges in her possession to the Florence Griswold Museum. George C. Lay, grandson of Bridges' close friend and portraitist Oliver Ingraham Lay, and the son of Charles Downing Lay, donated the Oliver

Ingraham Lay, Charles Downing Lay, and Lay Family Papers to the Archives of American Art and has been instrumental in the judicious dissemination of her artwork that has been another enormous boon to this project.

Bridges' oil paintings and watercolors are housed in museums nationwide, but I would like to single out colleagues at institutions who have made special efforts on her behalf and mine: at the American Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Stephanie L. Herdrich, Shannon Vittoria and Sylvia Yount; Florence Griswold Museum, Amy Kurtz Lansing and Jennifer Parsons; Peabody Essex Museum, George Schwartz; Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Anna Marley and Hoang Tran; and Philadelphia Museum of Art, Kathleen Foster's Water Color Society database has been indispensable. Max and Pamela Berry have lovingly collected her work. Jeffrey Cooley and Jennifer Krieger have been key promoters. Archival work depended upon the American Antiquarian Society, Christine Graham and Lauren B. Hewes; Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Marisa Bourgoïn and Liza Kirwin; Historic New England, Nicole Chalfant; The Huntington Library,

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Although Bridges was a highly successful artist, this volume is the first full-length investigation of her art and life. Writing a book *alla prima* is challenging at any time, but especially during a global pandemic. The fact that I was able to do so is due in no small measure to the individuals identified here and many other silent partners, to whom I owe a profound debt of gratitude. Deeply immersed in art, nature and history, my husband James Lancel McElhinney has left an indelible mark on every page of this book. I dedicate this book to him.



1 Fidelity Bridges, *Queen Anne's Lace*, c.1874–80, watercolor on paper, 37.5 × 27.3 cm (14 ¾ × 10 ¾ in), Private collection.

Preface

The year 2023 marks the centenary of the death of the best-selling female artist in post-Civil War America. Born in Salem, Massachusetts, Fidelity Bridges (1834–1923) forged an artistic career that spanned a record 50 years, longer than that of most of her male contemporaries. This moment seems ripe to document Bridges' life and assess her achievements, for despite her success and her hundreds of artworks residing in art collections across the United States, she has never been the subject of a full-length study. Two earlier studies provided a starting point for this book: Frederic Sharf's 1968 article identified primary documents and key artworks and May Brawley Hill's 1981 exhibition catalogue unearthed further material supporting her interpretation of Bridges as an American Pre-Raphaelite. In 2019, Bridges was featured as one of the few women associated with that movement in the exhibition and catalogue *The American Pre-Raphaelites: Radical Realists*.¹

Under the tutelage of William Trost Richards, Bridges first created detailed renderings of small corners of nature in oil on canvas. Soon she was enjoying 'a monopoly,' as critic S.G.W. Benjamin recognized, painting birds 'balancing on the apex of a wavering

stalk, or flying over the wheat or by the sands of the sea-beat shore.'² Immersed in the natural environment that surrounded her every day, she delineated New England birds in combination with wildflowers, grasses and weeds that awakened her viewers to new sources of beauty and wonder (fig.1).

Visual artists often insist that their art should speak for itself, while the details of their daily existence should remain confidential, and Bridges was no exception. Although she was a private person, thankfully she was an indefatigable writer of letters to her immediate network of family and friends, and even when undated, they help to reconstruct the details of her career (fig.2).³ She was also a great lover of literature who read constantly, and left behind a library whose contents have been compiled (see Appendix). As we discover in these pages, her life story illuminates her art just as her visual works can be read for clues about her character, ambitions and cultural milieu. Simultaneously we analyze her biography as history, following her career path that began during the United States Civil War and concluded in the wake of World War I, having weathered many socio-political and aesthetic changes. Born during the presidency of Andrew Jackson, she

lived to see women achieve the right to vote and may even have gone to the polls in 1920. Bridges shared with her lifelong friend and socially committed sculptor Anne Whitney the conviction that women had the right to shape independent lives on their own terms.

While nearly single-handedly transforming flower painting from a domestic outlet for female amateurs to a marketable commodity of professional artists, she conceived her pictures as weapons in the struggle for nature conservation. Rather than painting exclusively for a wealthy elite, she collaborated with famed printer Louis Prang to reproduce her work in high-quality color reproductions aimed at middle-class audiences. Representing a patch of poison ivy on the forest floor, or a cluster of autumn leaves and berries, Bridges' pictures possess the ability to direct our attention to those modest scenes with an intensity of focus unlike that of any other artist of her era. The outdoor world was not only the source of her pictorial motifs, it was as necessary to her life as oxygen. Writing these words at the end of year two of the global pandemic, it strikes me that Bridges' refined and understated art whispers eloquently of the benefits for humankind of connecting with nature.

May 23^d 91
My dearest Oliver
I look impatiently
now to know that you
are safe and at rest in
your own home - I have
deemed waiting for news
to long - but that I love
you and think of you
throughout I have been
sitting all day in the old
Patriarchal garden among
the tulips. The day was
well - I can not work with
a decided mind - and I
sit with you in all your suffer-
ings - With much love to
Marian and thank you for
kindness in writing so often -
Lovingly Fidelia

2 Letter from Fidelia Bridges to Oliver Ingraham Lay, 23 May 1890, Private collection.

Introduction

A DOUBLE LIFE

'We know little about her except that . . . she had quietly worn her Academic honors for half a century,' Edwin Blashfield declared in his eulogy for Fidelity Bridges (fig.3) read into the minutes of the National Academy of Design on 22 April 1924. She had been elected an Associate of that prestigious organization in 1873, an honor she shared only with Eliza Greator, the other living female member. She exhibited her oil paintings and watercolors of landscapes, birds and flowers there for four decades to strong popular and critical acclaim, and served on its numerous committees and juries, and yet the thrust of its president's remarks went elsewhere. 'We have perhaps no right to think of her as a Mary Wilkins spinster, heroine of brush and pencil bringing to us an atmosphere of old time New England,' he added, 'but somehow I *do* think of her in that way.' Blashfield was referring to Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's well-known short story 'A New England Nun' (1891), that narrated the struggles of the title character Louisa who became accustomed to her feminine lifestyle and belongings in the 14-year absence of her fiancé. Upon his return she rejected marriage to maintain her 'old maiden ways' and embraced her solitude.

During her lifetime Bridges had endured such stereotypes and learned to cultivate them and use them to her advantage. Remaining single, she projected the reclusive persona of a lonely artist in rural Connecticut, all the while conducting a double life: working in her studio, first in Brooklyn and then in Manhattan, and exerting a strong and successful presence in the largely male art world. Her circle of friends constituted a constellation of leading figures of contemporary culture: humorist Mark Twain, painter William Trost Richards, sculptor and suffragist Anne Whitney, novelist Henry James and publisher Louis Prang. The male artists with whom she formed lifelong friendships were married to women with whom she was also close: William Trost Richards and Anna Matlack Richards and Oliver Ingraham Lay and Hester Marian Lay. She also had a strong and lasting relationship with Anne Whitney, who was devoted to her life partner Adeline Manning. She avoided close attachments with single men and the selflessness prescribed for women by the cult of marital domesticity. There is no evidence that she engaged in intimacy with anyone, male or female. Instead, she chose to maintain her autonomy and focus on attaining professional fulfillment. Although she



3 Oliver Ingraham Lay, *Portrait of Fidelia Bridges*, c.1877, oil on canvas mounted on wood, 98.7 × 71.4 cm (38 7/8 × 28 1/8 in), oval, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC.

occasionally acknowledged loneliness and the personal sacrifices she made for her calling, she never wavered in her commitment to her artmaking and the solitary life that it required to excel in her field. Her achievements as a watercolorist, painter of field flowers, artist-ornithologist, fine artist and popular illustrator, and nature conservator bear individual attention.

WATERCOLORIST

Bridges is most often associated with her mentor Richards and the short-lived American Pre-Raphaelite

movement, but that was just the initiation point of a far more varied and incredibly accomplished career which resists a single label. Having played an important role as one of the few women artists in that group, she was instrumental in shaping several other key developments in the art of the United States during the last quarter of the 19th century.

She began painting birds and flowers based on Asian design in the 1860s, about the time that John La Farge is usually credited with initiating that strain in American art. By the early 1870s she had further distilled her compositions to create highly sought-after works which helped to transform flower painting from a private outlet for female amateurs to an accepted art form.² The secret behind her increasingly refined compositions was her prowess in watercolor technique that allowed her to work outdoors with a minimum of equipment and catch the most evanescent effects of her subjects. Shafts of golden grain waving nearly imperceptibly in the wind are interspersed with the milkweed whose delicate lavender flowers characteristically attract butterflies: the entire scene comes alive through her subtle manipulations of the aqueous medium (fig.4). Alternatively, a single plant stalk freely rendered against a neutral background appears to lift off the page, transforming the commonplace into the magical. Audiences uniformly praised her handling of the watercolor medium, combining realistic detail with a sense of wonder. Critic George Parsons Lathrop identified her as a leader in popularizing watercolor and legitimating it as a medium worthy to be considered fine art.³

PAINTER OF FIELD FLOWERS

Many artists paint beautiful pictures, but few change our ideas of art and beauty as Bridges did. In her best pictures she arranges blossoms and branchlets in a design reminiscent of Japanese prints, combined with the minutiae of the bird in the tree or the leaves on



4 Fidelia Bridges, *Milkweeds*, 1876, watercolor on paper, 43.8 × 33 cm (17 ¼ × 13 in),
Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, Utica, NY.



5 Fidelity Bridges, *Bindweed*, 1873, watercolor on paper, 28.5 × 22.2 cm (11 ¼ × 8 ¾ in),
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT.

6 Fidelity Bridges, *Bluebirds*,
c.1880, watercolor and gouache
on paper, 12.7 × 7 cm (5 × 2 ¾ in),
Wadsworth Athenaeum
Museum of Art, Hartford, CT.



the ground. Studies in visual perception tell us that open spaces move the eye of the viewer quickly across a page, while detail makes it pause to take it all in. Bridges' visual strategies compel her viewers to look closely at what is usually overlooked, to slow down and appreciate the modest field flowers or plants that many viewers would consider weeds (fig.5). 'I'll paint what I see – what the flower is to me . . . I will make even busy New Yorkers take time to see what I see of flowers,' Georgia O'Keeffe pronounced in the 1930s. Bridges' mission anticipates O'Keeffe's in the desire to 'take a flower in your hand and really look at it, it's your world for the moment. I want to give that world to someone else.'⁴ Guided by the conviction that the beauties of nature are expressive of divine qualities, Bridges created pictures that make us stop and look, that reassure us of the continuity and support of Mother Earth. One critic marveled that even the titles of her pictures 'have the fragrance of field flowers or else they glow with the plumage of birds.'⁵

ARTIST-ORNITHOLOGIST

In his influential book *Art in America* (1880), critic S.G.W. Benjamin credited Bridges 'with developing a charming and original branch of art': watercolors in which 'she composes stalks of grain or wild-flowers in combination with field birds, meadow-larks, linnets, bobolinks, sparrows, or sand-pipers.'⁶ He recognized that her genius lay in her scrutiny of the many species of birds familiar to her from her daily life, and in the way she paired them with local plants. Here comparison is inevitable with artist, naturalist, and founding father of American birding, John James Audubon, who embarked on his quest to paint every bird in the United States. Live birds move constantly and do not usually allow humans to get close enough to draw them, while stuffed birds lose the lustrous color that artists want to capture. Freshly killed specimens therefore made the best models that he posed in lifelike positions on

a board strung with wires. The result was *The Birds of America* (1827–38), a four-volume set of magnificent, hand-colored etched plates – after original watercolors by Audubon – portraying the birds in amazing detail, beautifully arranged on the page. He was the first to situate his exacting bird portraits in characteristic, if idealized, landscapes, ranging from sweeping panoramas to a close-up of a specific plant form, in ways that must have inspired Bridges. While Audubon tramped across the continent in search of new species and based his watercolors on scrutiny of the avian corpse, however, Bridges confined herself primarily to her own environs in the woods, and along the seashore or riverways of Connecticut. There, she sat day after day for weeks, earning the trust of her avian subjects so that she could get close enough to paint the living model and capture them perching on favored branches, interacting with their mates and young, and soaring in elegant silhouettes against the sky. Since Audubon wanted to show each bird life-sized, he used the largest sheets of paper then available – 'double elephant folio paper' (66.7 × 100.3 cm [26 ¼ × 39 ½ in]) – for his series of three-foot tall engravings. Bridges' watercolors, by contrast, were small in scale – sometimes less than 12.7 × 7.6 cm (5 × 3 in) – and intimate in sensibility, enticing the viewer to move in close and privately meditate on nature (fig.6).⁷

FINE ARTIST AND POPULAR ILLUSTRATOR

Her pictures in this vein attracted the attention of Boston publisher Louis Prang, who commissioned numerous works by her and reproduced them by chromolithography, the process he refined that produced precise color facsimiles. He sold them at prices the middle class could afford to adorn households across the country. Bridges developed a recognizable format – a pictorial brand – immediately identifiable as hers. Prang reproduced her series of *Twelve Months* (fig.7), often regarded as his finest work,



7 Fidelia Bridges, *October*, from *The Twelve Months*, published in 1876, chromolithograph, L. Prang & Co., 32 × 24.9 cm (12 3/8 × 9 7/8 in), Boston Public Library, Boston, MA.

and chromolithographed scores of her other pictures that made Fidelia Bridges a household name. Her multi-media practice and willingness to forego paint and canvas for ephemeral works on paper, herald her modern attitude toward artmaking.

By 1905 Walter Sparrow described Bridges as 'that delicate recorder of pleasant secrets learned from nature in the fields'. Compiling a book about women artists, he gave many only a passing mention while he devoted a paragraph to her work: 'fresh and sweet, charmed with much sympathetic appreciation of nature in some of her unnumbered smiling moods'. For him, however, that was too much of a good thing and he criticized her for painting 'as though the year were all springtime, a series of twelve May months, all full of gaiety and bounty'. He called her to task for ignoring 'that eternal warfare that accompanies Nature's bountifulness, filling the seed-carrying winds with the presence of death, and setting every living thing to prey upon another'. Sparrow was not alone in casting her as a Victorian Pollyanna, shutting her eyes to what was menacing and evil in the pastures and gardens she depicted.⁸ It was true that her *Twelve Months* and other commercial work for Prang were filled with sunny skies, happily chirping birds and strikingly beautiful plants, in a concession to public taste. These popular works contributed to the pigeonholing of her oeuvre that was, in fact, far more varied and revealing of the darker forces in nature.

This pioneering female artist was well acquainted with the cruelty of nature and the randomness of death. She lost both parents when she was sixteen, and six years later her elder sister Eliza – the de facto head of family – died of tuberculosis. She was preternaturally sensitive to human mortality and the emotional chaos it fostered, and came to comprehend the arbitrariness with which suffering could descend on the unsuspecting. Growing up in Salem, Massachusetts reinforced the constant fear of loss at sea, as reports of shipwrecks and drownings were not uncommon among a population that made

its living by fishing and shipping. Coming out of what has been called a 'consciousness for catastrophe', her art conveyed an anxiety over nature's potential for survival.⁹ Sometimes the specter of mortality intruded visibly in her work, as in the watercolor of a bird perched on a gravestone (fig.8), or others of birds motionless and silent, lying dead when she found them. Her art contained the reassurance that eventually spring would bloom, bringing the renewal of flowers and birds. But it also documented the end of the autumn and the arrival of the harsh New England winters, when the snow would fall, birds die and flowers perish.

NATURE CONSERVATOR

Some of the deadliest threats to nature, she learned, were perpetrated by humankind. Sportsmen posed a major peril. As hunting and fishing shifted from survival to recreational activities in the late 19th century, birds and other wildlife were in constant jeopardy. Fellow artist Martin Johnson Heade authored a series of articles protesting their wanton shooting of animals, and Bridges too wrote of 'many a pitiful tragedy' that 'the sportsmen cause'. She recalled 'on one of the Maine beaches, on a certain day of September, the beach-birds arrived in flocks'. She sat there all day into the night watching: 'Beautiful little creatures they were, white-breasted and spotted-backed. Forever in motion on their long slender legs, running down after the retreating waves . . . they gleaned an infinitesimal mouthful [of food] here and there'. She initially enjoyed a good rapport with the beach-birds: 'The first day these birds were very tame, and would come without fear close to me, as I sat on the sand'. Soon trouble brewed when 'the next day arrived the sportsmen; and never again could I approach near enough to watch them without a glass'. A few days later, 'while walking down the beach, I noticed a large flock of these birds, motionless, on a little point of sand . . . I discovered that



8 Fidelia Bridges, *Bird on a Gravestone*, 1876, watercolor on paper, 50.6 × 34.1 cm (19 ¹⁵/₁₆ × 13 ⁷/₁₆ in), Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA.



9 Fidelia Bridges, *Dead Robin*, c.1870, watercolor and graphite on paper, 20.3 × 25.4 cm (8 × 10 in),
Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AR.

they were all maimed birds, most of them lacking one leg, some of them trailing a broken wing' that eventually 'died of starvation'. She surmised that 'no doubt the sportsmen wounded more than they killed at each shot'. Trying to salvage something of this sad situation she 'asked a young man to give [her] one of the birds he had killed to paint'. Shock went through her when she heard 'his answer was that he had not troubled to pick them up!'¹⁰ She sometimes found dead birds during her rambles that she was able to use for study (fig.9), but never would have deliberately harmed one for any reason. The outrage she experienced on this occasion and many others led her actively to promote nature conservation, constantly seeking ways to protect the birds and their haunts.

Fidelia Bridges was a 'true daughter of New England.'¹¹ Formative years in Salem, supplemented by residence in Connecticut beginning in the 1870s, opened to her a growing art culture nurtured by a belief in art's therapeutic value. While her life was guided by a profound respect for nature, an adherence to a strenuous life and physical culture, and the ideals of the women's movement, her pictures make us pause and contemplate; they capture the quiet beauty of nature, a reassurance of its continuity and support. Through her pictures, her mentor Richards declared, one hears 'the voice of nature speaking in the idiom of art.'¹² Her work sold well during her lifetime, and now enjoys a robust market in the 2020s as the centenary of her death approaches. In between, her reputation has had its ups and downs, but she was always recognized, and her watercolors are represented in most collections of American art. She is one of the few women artists who came to prominence during the Civil War, and who has stood the test of time. She began life riding horses or in carriages, and lived to make telephone calls, ride in automobiles, witness the carnage of World War I and celebrate women earning the right to vote. Yet the full trajectory of her art life has yet to be traced. Combining a recovery of the artist's biography with close readings of her artwork, this book provides the

first full-length study of Fidelia Bridges. Organized loosely chronologically, it follows the evolution of the overlapping dimensions of her persona identified here that play out during the course of her complex 50-year career.